

Amazing Tales From the Check-Out Line

TABLOID DREAMS Stories

By Robert Olen Butler
Henry Holt. 203 pp. \$22.50

By Jonathan Penner

TABLOID DREAMS is a story cycle, a clutch of tales spawned together. Though narrative links join only two, all 12 stories have a family feature: Each is based upon a premise—stated in its title—that suggests a tabloid headline.

There are those that exploit cultural fixations on JFK and Elvis, those that report Titanic survivors and close encounters with extraterrestrials. Many chronicle spectacular miscarriages of love—"Woman Uses Glass Eye to Spy on Philandering Husband,"

Jonathan Penner is the author of two novels, "Natural Order" and "Going Blind," and a collection of stories, "Private Parts."

"Woman Hit by Car Turns Into Nymphomaniac," "Every Man She Kisses Dies."

Tabloid stories are sideshow freaks. They recount suffering so bizarre, and offenses of such enormity, that we can only laugh in horror. What fellow feeling have we for men who commit monstrosities or women who birth them? Far from sympathizing with such people, we quickly doubt that they exist at all. For of course tabloid claims are thoroughly fake.

But not so fast. In *Tabloid Dreams* Robert Olen Butler's agenda is to normalize and naturalize these freaks. After unembarrassedly granting each preposterous premise, he shows plain human life—the genuine article—sprouting in the very midst of absurdity. Here are real people tragically locked in unreal lives.

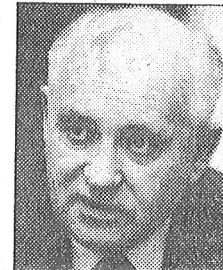
That painful paradox gives these stories their force and value. Who would expect a charge of recognition from this ontological

INSIDE

"Of the greatest political figures of the 20th century, Mikhail Gorbachev and Winston Churchill alone have taken up a pen to explain themselves and their contributions."

**ROBERT G. KAISER ON
MIKHAIL GORBACHEV'S "MEMOIRS"**

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quarter? We know perfectly well that these things (most of them) can't happen. But we also know that if they could, if in fact they happened to us, this is just how we would feel in consequence.

"Help Me Find My Spaceman Lover" is a fun house mirror of our courtship practice. Its comic juxtapositions are seen, for instance, in the heroine's perplexity: Can her lover—lipless, earless, equipped with numerous fingers and lots of tiny suckers—be stimulated by a show of cleavage? But in the sphere of the emotions, nothing whatever is bizarre. The heroine's eagerness for love, her joy at being chosen to receive it, her misguided decision not to travel with her man back to his native place in a far cosmos, her later longing to have him back—all are true with human feeling. This story shows how a ludicrous character can still be granted full dignity. Amazingly, her loss leaves us almost ready to cry.

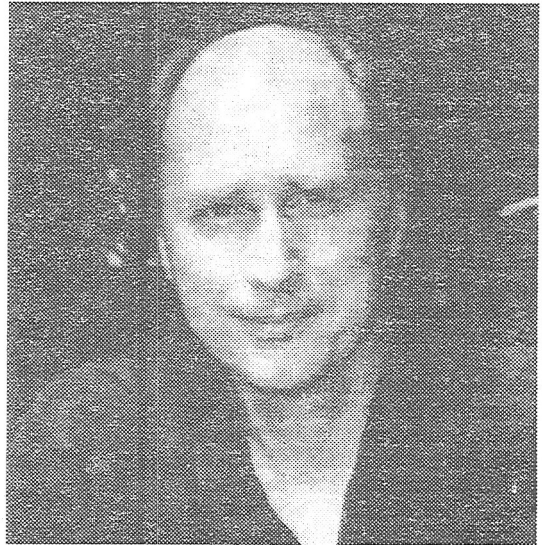
In "Jealous Husband Returns in Form of Parrot," it is the —Continued on page 12

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man who must love and lose and long. Imagine being purchased by your widow and hung in a cage, forced to witness her lovers' comings and goings. Further imagine that, for language to proclaim your love and vent your pain, you have only "hello," "pretty bird," "cracker" and a few other squawky expressions. As a man, you want to be held by your woman. Yet, as a parrot, you are shocked by her nakedness. She looks—well—plucked, and you feel not lust but pity. To protect her, you would gladly give the feathers from your own chest. Ingeniously combining the natures of man and bird, the story draws pathos from a comic metamorphosis.

Those stories with less startling premises tend to work less well. "Boy Born with Tattoo of Elvis" is plodding. "Woman Loses Cookie Bake-Off, Sets Self on Fire" loses itself in murky psychology. "JFK Secretly Attends Jackie Auction" requires an elaborate explanation that's too close to standard conspiracy theory. By contrast, "Woman Uses Glass Eye to Spy on Philandering Husband," one of the more astonishing conceptions, incorporates its premise with ingenuity. This is the funniest story in the book, spinning off scenes of sick hilarity. Yet the story is full of unmistakably real rage and grief.

Providing this book with an overall shape, the first and last stories are linked narratively. In "Titanic Victim Speaks Through Waterbed," the speaker is a stuffy Englishman whose spirit (or something) has been incorporated into water. It has undergone evaporation, fallen as rain, gurgled through pipes. It has been drunk as tea and voided as urine. At present it resides in, yes, a waterbed. Our hero gives a lovely account of the great ship's loss and in particular of his encounter then with a beautiful young woman. He re-



MAUREEN BUTLER

Robert Olen Butler

grets not having reached out to her. And she has similar regrets, as we learn when she turns out to be the narrator of the final story, "Titanic Survivors Found in Bermuda Triangle." Thus the overarching theme of the book, a theme echoed in many of the stories, is that of passion's failure.

Tabloid Dreams is an unrepeatable feat, a tour de force in both the laudatory (great achievement) and pejorative (clever stunt) senses of the term. With comic gall, it sets itself a goal of self-transcendence. The tabloid element is at once its shtick, its limitation, and the aesthetic pit from which its fine achievement rises.